

THE HYDROPHOBIA C

The Weird Tale of Black Sauriol, Who Longed for a Dry Country.

By ARTHUR STRINGER

NEVER had I known a man more out of place than was Black Sauriol in Pain-Court. Never had I known a human being more desolately cut off from the life around him, more isolated in spirit, more ill-fitted to the background from which he stood out so titanic, so grimly reticent.

One had only to know the sleepy little village of Pain-Court to wonder why so gentle a frame had ever come to hold so massive a figure. And perhaps it would be best to look first to the frame, and later to catch what outline one can of the figure itself.

In that most southerly and most sunny corner of all Canada, where the Great Lakes might be said to nurse in one gigantic arm the fruitful garden of Western Ontario, the lonely little French-Canadian village of Pain-Court stands shrouded and lost in the woody plains of Kent. Miles away on one side lie the long-redeemed marshes of St. Clair; miles away on the other twines and turns and wanders the slumberously uncertain River Thames. But unlike the cantons of the Lower Province, Pain-Court has no water and no water front. And just as it lies shut off from open water, so it lies shut off from the rest of the world. It is an isolated little colony of exiles, a century ago flung off in turn from an older colony of exiles—a colony which once gathered jealously together its cattle and grains and seedlings, and turned westward in quest of peace and quiet.

To-day they are the same as they were that autumn afternoon, a century ago, when their herds came slowing down the valley of the Thames and their diminutive French wagons creaked over the dusty plains of Kent. They have mingled little with the English who surround and hem them in. Their old French tongue has become strangely outlandish and alien; for they have taken up a dialect and idiom of their own. They have remained a tiny nation by themselves, with their own traditions, their own songs, their own folklore, and with even a language more or less their own. Some darker-eyed, merrier-hearted daughter of the segregated little settlement has at times, perhaps, taken unto herself a husband of the English tongue, but with her marriage she merged into the outer race and left the cluster of close-shouldered French homesteads still untainted and free of foreign blood. On the sunny side of each quaint little whitewashed cottage clammers a grapevine unknown to all the rest of Ontario, a grapevine still deluded into dreaming that it blooms on its old-time, sun-bathed slopes of France. The very geese and fowl are foreign-looking and diminutive. The village rosebushes bloom with exotic odours and colours. The cattle have not their like in all the country, so small and strangely marked and oddly named they are! And as in the Normandy and Provence of two centuries ago, the Angelus still rings out over the level summer fields, golden with grain, and the only busy hearts in all that sleepy, quiet, companionable, contented little country village are those of the bluebirds and the meadow-larks and the mad frequenters of those numerous little rows of hives which stand in so many dusky orchards.

This is the town to which Black Sauriol came, then, twelve long years ago, one brazen afternoon in late August, after a summer of unbroken drought had left the roads six inches in dust and the meadows pebbled with heat-cracks, with the cattle lowing about the half-dry wells and all the land as parched and dry and bleached as a mummy-cloth. That was the sort of country he liked, Black Sauriol declared, as his squinting aquiline, deep-set eyes looked out over the white fields swimming in heat. It was fine and dry—dry as any stretch of country he had ever seen, he repeated, as he rubbed his great, hairy hands hungrily together and sighed contentedly at the clouds of white dust that rose with every passing team. And after pacing the village for a few days, he made his home in a little whitewashed cottage on the outskirts of the town, unknown, uncomprehended, unwelcomed, asking only to be let alone, caring little how the countryside took him or what it said about him.

It was eight long years afterward that I happened into Pain-Court and first beheld Black Sauriol. It was a hot, stifling mid-August afternoon, so I stopped at the strange house on my way

and asked for a drink of water. Back in the heavy shadow of the closely shuttered room I saw a great, hairy figure rise slowly before me, like a startled bear rising in its cave. For Pain-Court long since had learned not to intrude on Black Sauriol and his silence; even the village children passed the place always with two fingers crossed, and the old folks, at the mention of his name, tapped their foreheads significantly. But I knew nothing of this at the time, and as I repeated my audacious request for a drink, I looked at the man more searchingly. He loomed above me three, even four inches more than six feet in height, his great gorilla-like arms reaching almost to his knees. His shirt was open at the front, and on either side of the hairy throat and chest I could see the huge muscles run, like water under a frozen rapid. His long, hungry-looking face was seamed and blanched, an unlikeliest leathery swarthy still attesting to the source of his name. His small, black eyes were deep-set and animal-like, full of constant, furtive unrest, alert and watchful and unsatisfied. The flexile, bearded mouth drooped pathetically. The lower half of one ear had been frozen off, and the uncouth ruddiness of the bulbous nose, that once in the Far North had frozen and split, gave a mask-like touch of gruesome comedy to the otherwise silent tragedy of the face.

WHILE I noted these things he brought me a mouthful or two of tepid water in the bottom of a little tin dipper, the only words from his lips being a commending, half-articulate sound, half groan, half grunt, as I tasted the rancid liquid and flung it indignantly into the dooryard dust. I noticed, however, as I held the dipper to my lips that he closed his eyes in horror, as though, it seemed to me, I had been drinking warm blood.

In Pain-Court itself, the next day, I heard enough of Black Sauriol. Yet his fellow-villagers, after having him under their eye for eight long years, could not agree as to whether he was French-Canadian or English or a mere half-breed—not a few being of the conviction that he was the devil himself. They agreed in only one thing, and that was in holding that he was a little weak-headed. He talked much to himself. When he was away from home and rain came on, he paddled insanely with his hands as he walked muttering back through the mud. Outside of his own little orchard and garden he did no work, though he seemed always to have money. Once a year, in midwinter when everything was frozen firm and solid, he travelled on snowshoes to the town of Chatham, from whence, in some mysterious manner, he always returned with money in his pocket. But in summer he could not be coaxed to venture near the town; he did not, he protested, like the look of the river there. He had been a fur trader beyond the Abitibi at one time; still later he drove a dog team in the Athabasca brigade, and sometimes he talked wildly about the Far North, and the journeys he had made there and the sights he had seen. But he spoke very bad French, the village declared, and he was very light-headed, and told over the same things a thousand times. Perhaps he could say it better in English, for, *mon Dieu*, how he did talk to the English doctor, five years back, when he found Pierre Delorme dying of a sunstroke and carried him across his shoulder to Isadore Michel's, where he himself suddenly sickened, when he saw them douse the limp body with buckets of water from the well. And it was odd, too, how he had fallen in a fit, three years back, at the time of the spring floods, when the little dry swale that ran behind Pain-Court had become a raging torrent. And it was at nothing more than a dead pig, floating down the muddy current, with its four feet up in the air. Yet he had screamed like a woman at the sight of it, and fallen and groveled in the mud like a man possessed of devils.

So the garrulous and companionable little village of Pain-Court, finding in him neither friend nor companion, had left him to his own devices. When a *fete* took place in the little town the grim, silent figure of Black Sauriol wandered forlorn and friendless beyond the outer fringe of their merriment. When a village dance occurred he drifted like a shadow about the gloomy orchards, outside the pale of their lights and laughter, feeling now and then, with almost terrified fingers, to see if the

grass were yet wet with dew. His face had even been seen pressed against window-panes at night, gazing in hungrily, yet disappearing down the darkness at the first lift of the latch.

After hearing all this, I went to his house; and as he would not talk, I left him tobacco, which he eyed furtively, and picked over, and then as furtively swept into his ragged pocket. I went again and again, but still no word passed between us.

It was one hot, breathless night at the end of August, with the heat lightning playing low on the horizon and a bank of ugly clouds coming out of the west, that I found him first stung out of his silence.

"We're in for a storm!" I said, as I beheld the grim, titanic figure peering westward from his unlighted doorway.

"My God, it is more rain again?" he said in agonized but perfectly audible English. I followed him audaciously into the house at that, and watched him while he closed windows and door and lit a grimy, smoke-stained lamp. His great frame shook a little, I thought, at the sound of the rising wind. As the first heavy drops splashed against the windows he cowered back in his corner like a beaten hound, with his knees drawn up to his chin and his huge, hairy hands folded tightly across them. It may have been merely the heat of the room—but beads of sweat came out on his leathery forehead and dripped slowly down his face.

I tried desperately to rationalize the man and his feeling, as I watched him there—to fathom the secret of his mad terror for such things—to account for this strange hydrophobic taint that made him the toy of climate and season. But the mystery seemed without a key to me, and I had to be content to wait my time.

The rain passed, and I looked out and saw a silvery moon through a rift in the clouds. The heavy-odoured night air, fresh and cool again, was like balm, and I stood in the doorway, drinking it in gratefully.

As I stood there I heard a whimpering voice over my shoulder. "This country is getting too wet for me," whined the huge man behind me wistfully. "I've got to get away from here, into a drier place!"

I turned on him sharply.

"Why are you so afraid of water?" I demanded.

"Why?" he thundered back at me, and I saw the muscles of either side of his great bared chest stand out belligerently. Then he slowly raised his hand and drew it across his wet forehead. "Why? I—I don't know," he said in a weak and faltering whine, and fell to picking at his ragged shirt.

It was some ten days after this that I caught sight of him making his way home through the falling rain. As his ponderous figure splashed slowly down the muddy road he paddled with his hands, first with one and then the other, cautiously, unceasingly. On his face was a look that seemed half agony and half anxiety; and though he passed within a few feet of where I stood watching him, his furtive, deep-set, animal-like eyes did not see me.

WHEN the weather cleared again, though, this madness seemed to pass away, and he grew more and more willing to talk, of an evening, over our pipes. Indeed, from that time on, in dry weather, he became gradually a more interesting companion, telling me of his trips through the Sub-Arctics, of his years as a fur trader, of mishaps and adventures in the great North-West. He even talked, a little incoherently it struck me at the time, of gold-fields which he had staked out in the Far North, of miles of claims, all his. And when a railway was built through to that country, so that a man could travel all the way on dry land, he would go back and take up his claim. He was foolish to wait so long; there was gold there, everywhere, and it was all his—acres of it, miles of it, mountains and rivers of it! That was the trouble, he sighed—it seemed all rivers, that country. The only way to get at it was in midwinter, when everything was frozen up. Then there was no open water, and a man could travel in comfort.

"Sauriol," I said, with a sudden illuminating thought, "were you ever wrecked?"

"Wrecked?" he echoed thinly, as he drew his knees up to his chin and folded his great hands across them. "Yes, I was wrecked once." He spoke vacantly and slowly, like a man in a dream.

"Where were you wrecked?" I asked sharply.

"Where?" he echoed vaguely, drawing his hand across his blanched forehead, pebbled like leather. "Why we called it Hunger River."

"But who were 'we'?"

He looked at me with the peevishness of a child. "Why, me and the Kwakuitl men. We had to sit there, years and years, so, with nothing but water

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